

~ An Interview with Gavin Semple ~

February 2001 c.e.

1. Zos Kia was a significant introduction to Zos and his works; how much preparation went into this particular title? The reproduction of the paintings seems quite beautiful, was it difficult getting the collectors to have such images photographed?

Well, the text itself was written fairly quickly, even partly 'automatically'; I'd reached a stage in my research where certain ideas needed to be brought firmly together, for myself initially, and so it really welled-up and out of me. An outburst of years of furious obsession and marvel. It was intended as a brief resumé which would extend the interest of those familiar with AOS, and provide a point of ingress for others to whom he was just a name. Obviously it doesn't go in 'at ground level', but as the basic information about Spare was, and is, available elsewhere I don't think it needed to. Some people have said it's difficult to read because of that, but I think it's a text you can return to and read new things into - at least I do, so I'm still very fond of it. I sometimes wish I'd written it, but the spirits took possession of it somewhere along the line! There are a lot of references which are significant, but aren't stressed - the Platonic influence, and the Tao, or Taliesin for instance; they were all put in for canny readers to spot and follow up if they so desired. They'll be developed in future books. Again, the book is written on three levels - though I didn't realize that at the time - which means there are any number of ways to jump across and between ideas, make different connections; it's quite densely packed in that respect, for all its brevity. There's often a poetic turn of phrase, which was necessary to encompass several ideas in one- and there are some deliberately buried treasures which I expect no-one will ever find., though I'll be delighted if they do! Mainly I wanted to find a way to reconcile the rather austere yet joyful (in the Nietzschean style), mystical philosophy we find in The Book of Pleasure with the image of the skulduggerous sorcerer which emerges in the works of Kenneth Grant. Sigils for practical ends on the one hand - rather low magic - and on the other the sublime heights of the Shunyavata, the doctrine of the Void, presented in his psychology of the Kia. Spare demonstrates this close interlocking, of course, within the pages of The Book of Pleasure, but I thought it would be useful to explore these themes through later periods of his life, and see if they would still dovetail so exquisitely - and of course they do. I wanted to broaden the readers' perspectives, instead of endlessly reiterating the so-called 'witchcraft' aspect, which, as we can now see was something of a masque he assumed in dealings with certain occultists in the 1950s, just as in the 'thirties he had proclaimed himself a Surrealist - with tongue firmly in cheek. Since the publication of Zos Speaks! the fallacy of subsuming Spare the magician within some 'tradition' becomes clear; look at the texts - where is the witchcraft, exactly? Even the text of 'Witches' Sabbath' refers explicitly to 'Ehr', which is Li Ehr, otherwise known as Lao Tzu, the Taoist sage. And how would you square Plotinus with any kind of witchery? I hope it all forces a long-overdue rethink in some quarters. I suppose the fact that he also drew African tribesmen means that he spent some time getting initiated in the Congo? In fact Spare was able to create masterful glammers that have protected and preserved his work, and will continue to carry it forward - and that's a very stylish and slick work of sorcery!

The colour illustrations of Zos-Kia are beautifully done; this was largely due to the skill of a remarkable photographer named Alex Brattell, who did a marvelous job, and to the repro house

that printed them. We have many kind and loyal friends among collectors of Spare's work, and they have all been incredibly generous and supportive in every way. Those pictures have become very popular on the internet, I notice. In a way it's absurd to publish fine limited edition books in the era of the Web; but that's one of the virtues of Fulgur, I think - we are permanently out of step, which gives us a lot of independence in our field. We're alone it, in other words! Compared with the ethos of the website, which is a thing that doesn't actually exist except as tiny electrical impulses and people's interpretations of them, our books are virtually hand-made. In the same way we applied artisan values to all aspects of the production - which in the case of Zos-Kia involved me cutting and hand-stamping several hundred talismans to be inserted in the books. Many happy hours we have whiled away tying ribbons on talismans, and Robert and Hayley have personally overseen the production of the books, standing over the printers at work to make sure they don't fuck up. It is important to give all the books a visual and tactile resonance - they should be fondle able and ogle able - stimulating to the body as well as the mind. The colours and typography are chosen for specific reasons. Witches' Sabbath would have smelled of goats but we didn't have time to perfect a method of perfuming them. We also paid close attention to creating a cohesion between pictures and text, which had never been done before in books on Spare; if you're going to mention Spare working in his flat, or Spare in the pub, then let's see him there as well. Death Posture? - here's a drawing of him doing it. It works, and it's been one way of utilizing the fruits of our research, rather than saving it all up for the biography.

2. Any plans on a Fulgur reprint of the essay? I noticed recently it was going for £80 a copy (December, 2000).

Yes, the prices for secondhand copies have suddenly spiraled haven't they? We made about 650 copies and they sold out in a year - six years on the value has increased sevenfold or more. Is it because people want to read it, or just to own it because it's a rare thing?: it's impossible to tell - one hopes the former - but no, we don't plan to reprint it. It encapsulates a particular period, a moment - one of those things that was right at the time, but our intention is always to move on to the next project, and not to retrace our steps.

3. The biography - which is our major and long-term project - covers Spare's entire life of course, but we considered publishing the 1909-1913 section as a comprehensive introduction to our reprint of The Book of Pleasure. In the event we decided to concentrate on unpublished material rather than reissuing Spare's own books. That didn't seem to be much of a challenge. It was really a question of weaving together the strands of information from various sources and drawing useful conclusions - which suggest some intriguing speculations. Those years were pivotal in several ways for AOS; for one, he was in contact, and ultimately in conflict, with Aleister Crowley. As Crowley is one of the yardsticks of modern occultism it's fascinating to watch the interplay between AC's work and Spare's, at the time that the artist was fully realizing his own mythos, his approach to creative magic - immersing himself in his vision. At the same time he was reaching the high point of his material success, his standing in the London art scene - and he got married, so it's really a time when we can see Austin seizing opportunities, and dealing with all sorts of responsibilities and pressures, mundane and other-worldly. It's a balancing counterpoint to the AOS we know from the 1950s - it reveals the contrasts which he lived, gives insight into the man through his response to situations, and illuminates the continuing threads even more clearly. It'll be published in due time.

4. Do you foresee an advancement in the recognition of AOS in the art world? In America, it seems that many just dabble with the concepts and art of Spare, viewing him as an oddity and running head first into Chaos Magick. All of the while missing the point entirely. Do you think that with the quality publishing groups like 93 Publishing in the 70s and Fulgur in the 90s it can combat the ignorance of so many would-be sorcerers in the scene? How many volumes before a weary eye is opened to discover their own doctrine?

There's certainly been a continued advancement of Spare's status if that's to be judged by the prices his work can command. The collection of his friend Frank Letchford is being sold at present (at www.occultartgallery.co.uk), and a number of sketchbook drawings from the 'forties and 'fifties are being sold as separate items; I think that speaks volumes about the appreciation of Spare's art, that these are now valued as pieces in their own right, worthy of being framed and hung, and enjoyed. But I don't believe AOS will ever take a place beside 'the greats' (so-called) in the view of the art world, and I don't think he'd want to - he put a lot of effort into rejecting all that while he was alive, he carved himself a very unique niche, and that's where he is likely to stay. Though he likes to gatecrash the party now and again. Astrid Bauer reckons he'll end up like Van Gogh, and it may very well be. But the art world runs on money, pure and simple - it's about investment, returns and consumption - and if you look at the rubbish that sells for millions, even by living artists, it becomes very obvious that the whole scheme is another racket; the artworks themselves only exist as tokens in the game of buying and selling, and profiteering. There is a certain amount of hustling amongst dealers in the Spare world, but with the prices reckoned in hundreds or a few thousand at the most it's definitely the cheap end of the market. When your pictures fetch a million, that's when people sit up and take notice. Spare's work carries something very different and very special within it, and it seems to attract certain people, and perhaps even deter others - as if his own personality and intent radiate through the pictures. Lots of people have noticed that - often those who aren't magically-minded at all. Apart from this he's very difficult to categorize; he was always out of step with movements in the art scene - too late for the 'nineties, too early for Surrealism and so on - and art people - both dealers and academics - like to think in shoebox terms; where can an artist be fitted in? Spare doesn't fit, he doesn't want to fit, and that's one of the strengths of his work - its brazen individuality. Dr. William Wallace published his ground-breaking study of Spare's books (cite ref.) which has put a foot in the door of the academic world at least, and there are now one or two scholars who have turned their attention to AOS in their university theses. The more attention from any side, the better, I think. It would be a shame if he was left closetted with occult enthusiasts, to the detriment of his reputation in the broader scheme. Spare's popularity seems to rise and fall in waves in America; the atmosphere of his work - particularly the writings - can often be somehow terribly English, and I don't know how well that transfers to the States. I get the impression that Americans can be very adept at swift assimilation, of objects, of information - naturally, for a society that encourages consumption, competition, free-trade - and that works pretty well when dealing with Crowley - I mean, you can set up a church and get tax-exemption, sell baseball hats, t-shirts and '93 bumper-stickers! With Spare you really have to go a lot deeper - he hasn't made it that easy for anyone, on any level, even down to his use of syntax and outlandish words - so perhaps that's why a lot of people have just grabbed at the Chaos Magick end of the thing and not tried to penetrate any further. Chaos Magick is virtually extinct in the U.K., but at least the trend helped to put Spare's name forward, albeit on a superficial level. As a movement in modern occultism Chaos did quite a similar job to Punk Rock in Britain - people were beginning to

realize that the conventions of their magic were often indefensibly silly, and that there was a whole generation of budding magicians who simply wouldn't accept the old regime; they weren't going to jump through hoops for years learning their prayers before they could do some really exciting experiments in demonology and go a bit mad. It was useful at a certain time for clearing out dead wood - although, tragically but perhaps inevitably, it ended up bogged down in the hierarchy game, just like its predecessors whom it hoped to lampoon. 'Battle ye not with monsters...' It was good for the AOS propaganda campaign, nevertheless, so we should remember it fondly for that at least. Anything that keeps Spare's name forward is to the good, I feel. I did spend some time manouvering around the London magical scene from about 1988 to 1991, and it became clear at a certain point that virtually everyone I met who claimed to be interested in Spare actually knew fuck all and didn't really care - the subject seemed to be another cipher in the game of impressing people and commanding attention. The perspectives were very narrow: 'Spare was a shaman!' was the typical opinion - in spite of the fact that the shaman is a professional magician who is expected to avoid innovation in his craft, with a specialized role, a servant of the community; while Spare deliberately sought out social contexts in which he could remain a misfit, an outlaw, did his best to flout convention at every turn, and continually introduced innovations into his art. He didn't have a drum either. Moreover, none of the frontline Chaos magicians had any real interest in art - with one honourable exception, Chrys Livings, who is a very talented illustrator - and this absence of aesthetic sensibility seemed to me to run counter to the whole of Spare's effort. That was a bit of a disappointment. So part of our aim with Fulgur was, I confess, to spring AOS from the Chaos trap, after it had become revealed as such, and put the whole thing on a new footing - to give more than another dull take on 'how to do sigils' mixed with tedious in-jokes and ill-digested particle physics, which was all that was on offer at that time. I think that's been accomplished. My feeling on encountering Spare's work in 1983 was that here was someone who was prepared to cut through all the nonsense in magic and say 'Here's how I do it - how are you going to do it?'; I thought he made it blindingly obvious that he was forging a totally personal path to realization, to vision and imagination, and that he expected the rest of us to do the same. But my influences had mostly been artists, writers, musicians out of the subculture - from the Decadents onwards - not magicians at all, so perhaps I had a fresher eye when I came to study magic. And it was probably sheer luck that AOS beckoned to me at that time - or maybe not. I reckon any dedicated magician will gradually formulate their own system once they've experimented with a range of methods, and most do - but AOS, certainly with his Book of Pleasure thesis, tends to favour the short path of antinomianism - challenge everything, kick over the traces, and see what happens and what is left when you've demolished the idols - in other words, confront all your conditioning head-on and ask 'How do I believe what I believe?' - look from angles which allow you to observe the process of your believing, instead of just exchanging one set of beliefs for another. So in a way his motivation is very much in the tradition of the early Gnostics - particularly the Cainites and their ilk - and therefore his approach lies much closer to the early traditions of Western magic, really quite divorced from the type of ceremonial psychodramatics that had developed by the beginning of the twentieth century, and the kind that's familiar to us after the 1960 and 70s revival. But there are cycles and parallels, inasmuch as Spare took the step on from Golden Dawn-style magic that others would later take when that old material became freely available again in the 1970s. 'How many volumes before a weary eye is opened?' you ask; well, I think you either get the point or you don't - it's probably always been that way - and it's the same when dealing with any creative individual. You can get hung up on someone's painting technique, or a

writing style, and be oblivious to the motivation behind it, and the intention and outcome of that particular process. Now the fashion for 'occult artists' is to embellish their pictures with distinctly Sparesque sigils; it's probably just a phase, but let's be honest, what value would Surrealism have if they'd all painted soggy watches? Who ever produced anything of lasting interest from cut-ups apart from Burroughs? Spare's work opens the doors to a vast range of possibilities which people can capitalize on, or they can let themselves get stuck in another form of idolatry, another set of conditionings - the choice is up to the individual. Does that partly answer your question?

5. How did Zos Speaks! manage to sell? Is this edition still available? I am sure the price of distribution must have been enormous; will anything as extensive be issued again by Fulgur?

ZosSpeaks! is still available, though it is selling very quickly. It was quite a step for us to do the book, as it's very large and copiously illustrated; quite a change from printing small editions of short books - almost stepping over into mainstream publishing territory, in fact. It is, and will remain, the authoratative book on AOS, so we feel privileged to have been given that opportunity - although, who else could have done it? Robert Ansell and Hayley Tong made an incredible job of the production, but I do not envisage that we will want to publish anything as ambitious again. Robert's shrewd financial sensibilities made it possible - even with the cost of distribution and so on, it's an astonishingly low-priced book, considering its format and content. If you don't know anything about AOS the book will tell you a lot; if you already know a lot, you'll be amazed all over again. I like to look at the pictures and dribble.

6. How would you define Zos Kia Cultus, and what do you see as its future and purpose?

It's a vexed question: on the one hand there are people who nurture the belief that 'ZKC' is a 'thing-in-itself' - some club or gang that you can be on nodding terms with, or even join and belong to. That's the t-shirt mentality at work - this urge to label and compartmentalize one's self. It can work for some people as a motivation for action, but ultimately it's a dead end. On the other there's the attitude that it's a convenient nominalization, coined by Kenneth Grant in the 1950s, for the current of thought - or the impulse, wherever it comes from - that impelled Spare's work and, quite literally, exudes from it. I prefer that one, it allows for change and a continual development of the actual vehicle of the impulse - that is, the way each person receives it and passes it on. There were a lot of Dada and Surrealist artists, and a whole gang of 'Beat' writers, but some of them came to epitomize these terms and overshadowed the others. Perhaps 'Zos Kia Cultus' relates to Spare in the same way, except that there was only one of him to begin with! It's a name to conjure with though, isn't it? - and perhaps that is why Grant thought it up - he has a knack for creating glammers, weaving mystique for specific ends. His interpretation of the term has changed over the years, or at least he has been conscientious in presenting it from different perspectives - changing the mask, so to speak, just when people have got used to the last one. Andrew Chumbley and one or two others have taken up the idea that ZKC is, or should be, an elite coterie of artist-occultists, which is an interesting proposition - though I would suggest that, for an artist, such self-labelling undercuts the strident individualism that is crucial to the whole conception. These notions usually come from people who like to be in groups, and preferably in charge of them. It's not to my taste. And anyway, why restrict it to the visual arts? Dance, drama, poetry, music - the whole gamut of creativity - can be exploited as paths to knowledge and vision, the realization of will and imagination which is the essence of magic. As regards music,

Coil have begun to use 'ZKC' as an explicit frame of reference, even projecting the words onscreen during their live performances - but then their kinship with Spare's creative methods, the fact that they share an instinct with him, has been implicit in their work from the start. They have exploited, in a very creative way, particular regions of consciousness which were obviously familiar to AOS - and that's exactly what he was urging people to do, from *The Book of Pleasure* right through to his *Logomachy* and other texts of the 1950s. Exploring, experimenting, drawing conclusions - and presenting them in the context of art. And there's a lot of bizarre humour in their work, which he no doubt appreciates. I'd see them as a prime exemplar of ZKC manifesting - though in reality there is a whole network of subcultural influences culminating in their work. Of course, there are a number of others working along similar lines, but not so well-known. All power to them. (John Balance of Coil gave his views on the subject in *Fortean Times* ? www.forteanimes.com/artic/coil/coil.html) One would hope that if ZKC is anything, it exists in that moment of contact between Spare's work and the individual's mind, open to its subversive influence; and then in the fruit of that communion, an inspiration and a creative response. The moment remains - the transmission continues. After all, the world has been made such a bloody miserable place to live that the only way to go is into the imagination, and through that into - somewhere else. I'm probably paraphrasing Spare in saying that, but it's the way I feel about the future and purpose of anything - not just Zos Kia Cultus.